

Spring Ephemerals: Fleeting Woodland Gems



Take an early spring walk in the forest, and you may be rewarded with the sight of little jewels sprinkled on the forest floor. Known as spring ephemerals for the brief time that they are visible, these typically diminutive native wildflowers are well worth the effort of slowing down to get a good look at them.

Spring ephemerals take advantage of sunlight breaking through to the forest floor before the trees overhead leaf out. Once that happens, these wildflowers will often finish their reproductive process, wither, and disappear for another year. Meanwhile, their underground root systems—often corms, bulbs, or rhizomes—store nutrients from the soil in preparation for the following year's display.

How do these fascinating plants reproduce? In early spring most of the common pollinating insects haven't emerged yet. Some plants, like round-lobed hepatica, have self-fertile flowers and don't need to be pollinated. Others are pollinated by specialized beetles and ants. (Ants not only pollinate the flowers but also helpfully later distribute the seeds). Other spring ephemerals, like the dramatic red-petaled trillium, have evolved to smell like rotting meat in order to attract flesh-eating flies.

Some of the spring ephemerals most likely to be seen in this area include:

Dutchman's Breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*)

These quirky white and yellow blooms look like pantaloons hanging upside down on a clothesline. The yellow reproductive parts are protected from wind and rain because they are dangling from the bottom of the flowers. This flower is perfectly adapted for pollination by the queen bumblebee, who emerges from her winter rest just when Dutchman's breeches bloom. Her long tongue can reach the nectar deep inside the white pantaloon legs, pollinating the flowers as she goes. Dutchman's breeches grow in rich woodlands or clearings, often in rocky areas.

Eastern Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica*)

These sweet plants, very important to native bees, have white or pale-pink, five-petaled flowers that face upward beguilingly. Their petals have darker-pink veins that serve as nectar guides. They appear at woodland edges, shady roadsides, and sometimes fields. Their flowers open when the temperature exceeds 52 degrees, when flies and native bees are active. Spring beauty may go from leafing out to flowering and setting seed all in two weeks. Seed dispersal, which occurs when the sepals force the seeds to be ejected explosively, may take two weeks longer. Another name for this plant is fairy spuds, for the bulbs' resemblance to miniature potatoes.

Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*)

This is the earliest lily to bloom. It bears downward-facing yellow trumpets with petals that curve upward. The flowers, appearing when the plant is four to seven years old, close at night and on overcast days. The splotches on trout lily's leaves resemble the markings on native brook trout, hence its name. Among its pollinators are the red-necked false blister beetle, several native bees, honeybees, and queen bumblebees.

Red Trillium (*Trillium erectum*)

This elegant flower has three heart-shaped leaves, three sepals, and three deep-red petals. From the center extend creamy white stamens, lending it a distinctly Christmasy character. Other names for red trillium include trinity flower, wake-robin (it blooms when robins used to appear in spring), and stinking Benjamin. Trilliums bloom in May, when the trees are beginning to leaf out. They are long-lived but take two years to develop from seed.

Many other spring ephemerals await your discovery, including bloodroot, Jack-in-the-pulpit, mayapple, lady slippers, etc. So, grab a wildflower guide and enjoy finding them.

NOTE: Never dig up a wild spring ephemeral to transplant in your own garden. These plants have very specific growing requirements and are often threatened or rare. They face pressures from deer predation,

flooding, pollution, and development. Let them thrive where you find them. Some native plant nurseries offer these plants or their seeds for sale.

Featured Spring Ephemeral Plants



Dutchman's Breeches
Dicentra cucullaria

Spring Beauty
Claytonia virginica

Trout Lily
Erythronium americanum

Red Trillium
Trillium erectum